

For Immediate Release
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KHARTOUM, Sudan – During an official visit to Sudan by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), government police and security personnel arrested and abused opposition members of Sudan's National Assembly during their attempt to peacefully present a letter urging the enactment of human rights reforms and other key legislation necessary to implement the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA).

USCIRF today urged U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to take action to ensure the full implementation of the CPA.

"We are thoroughly distressed and shocked by these most unfortunate and appalling events. The ruling party's lack of good faith and fair dealing on CPA-required agreements in recent months has reached a new low," said USCIRF Chair Leonard Leo on his way back from Khartoum. Leo led the USCIRF delegation from Dec. 6-10, 2009. "We watched the CPA being hijacked in front of our eyes."

Leo noted that there is a widespread perception in Sudan that the U.S. Special Envoy and the European Union Special Representative, as well as African Union countries, China and others with a special relationship with Sudan, have emboldened the National Congress Party.

"What we heard and saw in Sudan confirms this, with the ruling party now ignoring the constitution and laws and using security forces to arrest and beat senior government officials with impunity in the capital city," said Leo. "Leadership will come only from the top, and many of the officials we met were urging the Commission to take home a plea for greater U.S. strength and pressure on recalcitrant signatories. We call upon Secretary Clinton in the next two weeks to send a strong message to the CPA signatory parties, as well as the international community, by personally standing with the peace process and seeking to reestablish a level playing field for fair and full implementation of the CPA."

In meetings with senior Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) officials following the events on December 7th, including a meeting with SPLM National Assembly Caucus Leader Yassir Arman and other members of parliament, the Commission was told of physical beatings. An SPLM official revealed bruises, which he said were the result of being struck with batons and kicked repeatedly. In addition to Arman, officials detained included six other National Assembly members, three state parliamentarians and one state minister.

In addition to the detention of 11 SPLM government officials, USCIRF was told that approximately 120 women were detained as they peacefully demonstrated against the actions of the security officials and called for the release of those leaders being held in custody. Reportedly, dozens of women were beaten with batons once they were loaded into the police

transport vehicles. USCIRF was also told that several SPLM officers elsewhere in Sudan were arrested, denied legal representation, and prevented from holding press conferences in response to the arrests in Khartoum.

USCIRF demands a prompt, impartial and effective investigation into the physical abuse and de facto detention of SPLM parliamentarians outside the National Assembly.

“It was shameful for NCP officials to subject one party to the peace negotiations and of the government to this kind of unlawful treatment,” said Commissioner Felice Gaer, who helped to lead the mission to Sudan.

Prior to their detention, the SPLM officials tried to present a memorandum to the Speaker of the National Assembly demanding action on outstanding bills necessary to reform Sudan’s laws to bring them into compliance with international human rights standards and to implement key provisions of the 2005 CPA, which ended more than 20 years of civil war between the North and the South.

Reforms of the national security law and the criminal procedures laws are vital to ensuring free, fair, and credible elections in April 2010. USCIRF has urged that prompt adoption of outstanding laws on the referendum for self-determination for Southern Sudan in 2011, the Abyei referendum in 2011, and popular consultations for Southern Kordofan/Nuba Mountains State and Blue Nile State is imperative to prevent a return to civil war in Sudan. These bills need to be adopted in the current National Assembly session that is scheduled to end on December 21.

“The Speaker of the National Assembly was aware of this memorandum and stated to the national media that he would welcome its receipt. The fact is that the immunity that members of parliament legally enjoy was apparently of no consequence to the ruling party,” said Imam Talal Eid, who also was on the delegation. “What these beatings and arrests of elected officials tell us, along with the allegations that media photos of the incident were confiscated, is that the ruling party cannot be trusted to participate in the implementation of free and fair elections without additional and substantial international pressure.”

The Commission conducted its consultations in Khartoum December 6-10, having met with a number of high-ranking officials from the Government of South Sudan as well as the government in Khartoum, the SPLM and opposition parties, and the Assessment and Evaluation Commission, among others. However, the Minister of Interior canceled his meeting with Commissioners shortly after the crackdown at the parliament, and the Minister of Justice rejected repeated requests to meet.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF’s principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.

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